WASHINGTON POST
20 MAR 1971

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Mr. Salant's Letter

In our letters space today we print a response by Richard Salant of CBS News to our recent editorial concerning the dispute between CBS News, the Pentagon, Vice President Agnew, Congressman Hebert, and now—as it seems—The Washington Post. In time the U.N. may have to be called in, but for now we would like, in a unilateral action, to respond to Mr. Salant's complaint. We think it is off the point. And we think this is so because Mr. Salant invests the term "editing" with functions and freedoms well beyond anything we regard as common or acceptable practice. Mr. Salant taxes us with unfairly recommending two sets of standards in these matters, one for the printed press and another for the electronic. But he reads us wrong. We were and are objecting to the fact that *specifically, in relation to question-and-answer sequences,* two sets of standards *already* exist—and that what he and others in television appear to regard as simple "editing" seems to us to take an excess of unacknowledged liberties with the direct quotations of the principals involved.

Before we go into these, a word might be of use about the editorial practices (and malpractices) common to us both. When a public official or anyone else issues a statement or responds to a series of questions in an interview, the printed media of course exercise an editorial judgment in deciding which part and how much of that material to quote or paraphrase or ignore. The analogy with TV's time limitations, for us, is the limit on space: deciding which of the half million words of news coming into this paper each day shall be among the 80,000 we have room to print. Thus, "Vice President Agnew said last night . . . Mr. Agnew also said . . ." and so on; it is a formulation basic to both the daily paper and the televised newscast.

That bad and misleading judgments can be made by this newspaper in both our presentation and selection of such news goes without saying—or at least it did until we started doing some public soul-searching about it in this newspaper a good while back. There is, for example, a distorting effect in failing to report that certain statements were not unsolicited assertions but responses to a reporter's question. But that we do not confuse the effort to remedy these defects with a waiving of our First Amendment rights or a yielding up of editorial prerogatives should also be obvious to readers of this newspaper—perhaps tediously so by now. What we have in mind, however, when we talk of the license taken by the electronic media in the name of "editing" is something quite different, something this newspaper does not approve and would not leap to defend if it were caught doing. It is the practice of printing highly rearranged material in a Q-and-A sequence as if it were verbatim text, without indicating to the reader that changes had been made and/or without giving the subject an opportunity to approve revisions [illegible]

It is, for instance, presenting as a direct six-sentence quotation from a colonel, a "statement" composed of a first sentence from page 55 of his prepared text, followed by a second sentence from page 36, followed by a third and fourth from page 48, and a fifth from page 73, and a sixth from page 88. That occurred in "The Selling of the Pentagon," and we do not see why Mr. Salant should find it difficult to grant that this type of procedure is 1) not "editing" in any conventional sense and 2) likely to undermine both the broadcast's credibility and public confidence in that credibility.

The point here is that "The Selling of the Pentagon" presented this statement as if it were one that had actually been made—verbatim—by the Colonel: TV can and does simulate an impression of actuality in the way it conveys such rearranged material. Consider, again from the same documentary, a sequence with Daniel Z. Henkin, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs. This is how viewers were *shown* Mr. Henkin answering a question:

> Roger Mudd: What about your public displays of military equipment at state fairs and shopping centers? What purpose does that serve?
> Mr. Henkin: Well, I think it serves the purpose of informing the public about their armed forces. I believe the American public has the right to request information about the armed forces, to have speakers come before them, to ask questions, and to understand the need for our armed forces, why we ask for the funds that we do ask for, how we spend these funds, what are we doing about such problems as drugs—and we do have a drug problem in the armed forces; what are we doing about the racial problem—and we do have a racial problem. I think the public has a valid right to ask us these questions.

This, on the other hand, is how Mr. Henkin *actually* answered the question:

> Mr. Henkin: Well, I think it serves the purpose of informing the public about their armed forces. It also has the ancillary benefit, I would hope, of simulating interest in recruiting as we move or try to move to zero draft calls and increased reliance on volunteers for our armed forces. I think it is very important that the American youth have an opportunity to learn about the armed forces.

The answer Mr. Henkin was *shown* to be giving had been transposed from his answer to another question a couple of pages along in the transcribed interview, and one that came out of a sequence dealing not just with military displays but also with the availability of military speakers. At that point in the interview, Roger Mudd asked Mr. Henkin whether the sort of thing he was now talking about — drug problems and racial problems—was "the sort of information that gets passed at state fairs by sergeants who are standing next to rockets." To which Mr. Henkin replied:

> Mr. Henkin: No, I didn't—wouldn't limit that to sergeants standing next to any kind of exhibits. I knew—I thought we were discussing speeches and all